

“Amity, Enmity, and Emotions in the *Recollections* of Elizabeth Johnston,
Georgia Loyalist.”

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“No one could possibly claim,” explained Arthur Eaton in his preface, that Elizabeth Johnston and her *Recollections* “are of very wide historical or even biographical interest.” She did not fire any cannons or act heroically, did not enter into personal correspondence with great figures, did not influence the course of political events, or in any other ways stake a claim to historical significance. Indeed, Eaton felt the need to justify her significance through her progeny, reeling off a long chain of her descendants who had subsequently held weighty positions in Canada – chief justices and Supreme Court judges, reverends, senators, and physicians “of the highest professional and social standing.”¹ Firstly as a loyalist, and secondly as a woman, Johnston was – until recently – pretty irrelevant to the historiographical architecture of the American Revolution. Johnston was 72 in 1836 when, principally for her grandchildren, she wrote her memoirs, which comprised a loose narrative interspersed with retrospective observations and memorable vignettes, and she appended to them a set of precious family letters dated between 1769 and 1784. She chose the title *Recollections of a Georgia Loyalist*, a notable statement of identity in light of her residency in Nova Scotia from 1806 until her death in Halifax in 1848.² This indicated that Johnston carried with her for the rest of her life, like thousands of her contemporaries, the physical and psychological traumas of the American Revolution.

Of all the groups touched by the Revolution, migrant loyalist women (whether white or black) arguably experienced the most radical transformation in their life prospects. On top of the widespread dislocation wrought by war, loyalists were more likely than others to experience periods of fugitivity or forced

migration, to endure close association with a transient military (complete with physical, sexual, and epidemical dangers), to come under legal pressures about their status and rights, and to suffer separation from family and institutional support mechanisms.³ Had the Revolution never happened, Elizabeth Johnston might have reasonably expected, given her background, to go on to become a plantation mistress, socialite, and slave-owner in Georgia. But things were different in Nova Scotia, with many more free blacks than slaves, courtesy of the manumission and relocation policies adopted by self-interested British authorities during the War for Independence. When Johnston alighted at Annapolis Royal in the 1800s, the baggage carters working at the dock included one such freed black, a Rose Fortune, who reportedly held a monopoly in the local trucking business, and charged modest prices.⁴ For better or worse some 30,000 loyalists, including the Fortunes and the Johnstons, would ultimately have to start lives afresh as “pioneers” in Nova Scotia, a long way from the homes and the futures that might have been theirs in the South.

In this paper, I’d like to sketch out the ways in which the Revolution shaped Johnston’s emotional landscape.¹ And to lend a bit of traction to the rather nebulous phrase “emotional landscape,” I’d like to draw on an older debate in anthropology about what an emotion actually *is*. Some three decades after Elizabeth Johnston died, pioneering psychologist William James (brother of Henry) argued that emotions were physiological events, “bodily changes [that] follow directly from *perception* of the exciting fact.” James famously used an encounter with a bear to put forward his case: rather than running from the bear because we are afraid, he posited, we are afraid because we run from the bear. This view, that emphasised the primary role of the nervous system, and held

¹ [When we think of how Revolution shaped emotions, tend to think in terms of masculine traits (Gordon Wood, Joseph Ellis, McConville, McDonnell)...cf. Nicole Eustace, Sarah Knott]

some currency for a long period, was decisively dismissed as fallacious and incomplete by various anthropologists, including Robert C. Solomon, in the 1980s. Instead, understandings of “emotion” have followed a similar trajectory to perhaps the more familiar language (for early Americanists) of “race” – from physiological constructs in the Victorian era to cultural constructs at the end of the twentieth century. So Solomon asserts that an

“emotion is a system of concepts, beliefs, attitudes, and desires, virtually all of which are context-bound, historically developed, and culture-specific (which is not to foreclose the probability that some emotions may be specific to *all* cultures).”

I’d like to use Elizabeth Johnston to suggest that there was a distinctive set of loyalist emotions based upon their similar experiences during the American Revolution. And that beyond their self-evident political consensus (i.e. their loyalism to the British Crown), these emotions and sensibilities helped to cement a sense of common identity. For white women in particular, once the Revolutionary War had started, this shared *emotional* landscape was arguably the most palpable and most meaningful expression of their identity as Loyalists. So in describing Johnston’s experiences, I want to emphasise how her emotions were “context-bound” and interpretive rather than simply reflexive. In a more generalised sense I’d also like to employ William James’s provocative bear...his device of challenging cause and effect, and close with the suggestion that: most white women did not become fugitives because they were Loyalists. They became Loyalists because they were fugitives, and shared a common set of emotional experiences tied up with that mobility.

Elizabeth Johnston, nee Lichtenstein, was born ten miles or so from Savannah, on the Little Ogeechee River, on 28 May 1764. Her parentage reflected the

diverse origins of Georgia's fledgling population. Elizabeth's father, Johann Lichtenstein (anglicised as Lightenstone), was himself born half a world away in the Russian seaport town of Kronstadt.⁵ This seafaring background served Lightenstone well, enabling him to gain employment as a scout-boat pilot for the royal government that took over the administration of Georgia in 1752.⁶ Elizabeth's mother was Catherine Delegal, a woman of French Huguenot stock whose father, Philip Delegal, had left South Carolina in 1736 as an ensign in James Oglethorpe's company.⁷ Elizabeth's bloodline was thus an odd commingling of peoples set in motion by upheavals in Europe, but tied by a strong, shared commitment to devout Protestantism, an influence that subsequently dominated Elizabeth's worldview throughout her life, and that she herself characterised as her "knowledge of the truth of His Holy Word."

Though you would not know it from her *Recollections*, which as memoirs were, of course, consciously and subconsciously sanitised, Johnston was surrounded by slaves from an early age. Her father apparently owned three bondspeople outright according to his land grant application of 1766, but, thanks to his marital connections, was soon more heavily involved in slave ownership and plantation management. The fertile lands on Skidaway Island, where they lived, were used to raise provisions for export, and for the production of the major slave crop indigo.⁸ John Lightenstone posted an ad in the *Georgia Gazette* for a runaway "new negroe wench...supposed to be taken away by the Indians" in Elizabeth's formative years. But immersion in the complex world of exploitative race relations appears to have made little impression on Elizabeth that she wanted to share. Only rarely, and casually, did she engage with the subject of slavery. These passing references largely overlooked the traumas and depredations of the institution, and incidents such as runaways. Instead, when Johnston dealt with bondspeople, she characterised them as "servants" and described them as "greatly attached to the family."⁹

Needless to say, at the time, Johnston must have been acutely conscious of the significance of bondspeople to her life in Georgia, Jamaica, and beyond. In her correspondence she openly discussed her father-in-law's sale of his "negroes" in 1784, commenting that he had received many inquiries from Charleston in the aftermath of the Revolutionary War, as opportunistic developers sought to do business with emigrants.¹⁰ Contemporary letters also made clear that her onerous childcare responsibilities (she gave birth at least ten times) were shared with an enslaved nurse named Hagar, something that Elizabeth left hazy in the *Recollections* themselves.¹¹ In spite of these conscious efforts to marginalise the influence of bondspeople on her history (and vice versa), Elizabeth Johnston inadvertently offered up evidence that the institution of slavery gnawed at the subconscious and emotional worlds of elite white women: when her daughter Catharine was given eighty drops of laudanum to quieten an illness in Jamaica, Elizabeth described the violent delirium that was induced as "a dreadful state, thinking that there was an insurrection of the slaves, that they had set fire to the house, and that the bed she lay on was in flames." Beyond the slave societies of the lowcountry and the Caribbean, Elizabeth and her daughters had to develop new skills and new strategies, for among the transplanted loyalist community in Nova Scotia "it was thought a great indulgence if the mistress had no more labor than to have the fag [supervision] of all the children."¹² Overall, then, the emotive issue of slavery was excluded from Johnston's *Recollections*: there was no emphasis on warm emotions (benevolent slaveownership, religiosity or gender affinity); nor for that matter darker emotions (jealousy, anger, suspicion).¹³

Elizabeth Johnston's cold, emotionless depiction of those outside of her recognised social orbit contrasted dramatically with the warmth she expressed and devotion she showed to those inside it. Her writings about her family

resound with the themes of discipline *with* affection, of duty *with* love, for instance stating of her fond father: “I loved him, yet I always from a child had an awe of him.”¹⁴ Johnston used this paradox of generational deference as a way of interpreting her emotional experiences during the Revolution. She placed in the foreground constancy, self-sacrifice, respect, and obedience. But whereas such disciplined virtues had, in other times, been softened by “affection” and “love”, the Revolution considerably tilted the balance away from these redeeming aspects. Instead, Johnston’s writing conveys a sense of imprisonment, of the loss of a future that might have been hers; in her letters she increasingly accentuated loneliness, depression, frustration, and introspection.

Elizabeth Johnston’s placid only-childhood, then, was radically transformed and emotionally charged by the onset of the American Revolution. The significance of the event for her was largely social rather than political, and she displayed little interest in the competing ideologies or finer points of constitutional friction. This apparent disinterest reflected her age (just twelve at the signing of the Declaration of Independence) in conjunction with her gender. The political Revolution was a matter for adult men, a belief that John Adams articulated in response to his wife Abigail’s provocative call to remember the ladies: “their Delicacy renders them unfit for...the arduous Cares of State.”¹⁵ But a third factor explaining Elizabeth’s lightweight treatment of the political conflict was common to a large segment of Americans described by Benjamin Rush in 1777 as the “great number of persons who were neither Whigs nor Tories.”¹⁶ Robert M. Calhoun has estimated that approximately half the colonists of European ancestry tried to avoid involvement in the struggle, most of them “simple apolitical folk.”¹⁷ Like many Georgians, Elizabeth’s future husband was cautioned by his father in 1774 against “taking any part in the unhappy political disputes...be silent on the subject...while matters of such consequence are agitating.”¹⁸ Leslie Hall has argued that Georgia settlers were only really

consistent in their desire for property rights and civil authority, and that many chose to swear allegiance to any politicized group that asked them to do so if it secured their holdings – including lands and, notably, slaves.¹⁹

Elizabeth herself never really explained what motivated the “rebels” to take action in Georgia, falling back on rather vague, passive references to “the spirit of the times” afflicting otherwise “amiable” and “fine” young men such as John Milledge who would fall from amity to enmity.²⁰ But through the refracting prism of her memoirs it is possible to discern elements of regionalism and elitism. She felt that people in Georgia were “inflamed” as outside conflicts “began to spread to the southward” after 1774. Moreover, although these “people” included her teachers and the likes of Milledge, she deliberately disparaged them as a “ragged corps,” as “the scum [that] rose to the top.” If there exists a faint suggestion in Johnston’s comments that Georgia’s revolution was fomented by the lower orders being swept up by New England radicalism, far more apparent is Elizabeth’s own bitterness at her family’s subsequent victimisation. Her American Revolution, like thousands of her contemporaries’, was not about noble ideas but about hard realities.

So what was life like for a loyalist Georgia girl during the messy period of British control in the lowcountry (1779-1782)? Elizabeth’s memoirs place a strong emphasis on the militarisation of society – of a martial transformation in the dynamic of everyday life. The story is a depressingly familiar one at the start of the twenty-first century: British and American troops trying desperately to build on a successful invasion, to pacify a semi-armed and highly mobile civilian population, and to politically unify a disinterested and internally riven society. Elizabeth noted that after the recapture of Savannah, the inhabitants were exposed “to the fury of the British soldiers,” who evidently struggled to differentiate friend from foe, and committed much outrage, despite the best

efforts of commanders such as Archibald Campbell.²¹ On the one hand, rebels and fearful neutral refugees streamed away with what goods and belongings they could carry. On the other, loyalists and neutrals who had tolerated the administrative breakdown under the Patriot government were now infused with a new confidence, and hopeful that economic order could be restored. Elizabeth, now fifteen, travelled from her great-aunt's isolated plantation, passing nervously through Hessian officers' checkpoints, to a Savannah whose streets were still littered with feathers, papers, and belongings. There, she was emotionally reunited with her father, whom she had not seen since his humiliating flight from Skidaway, half-shaved and half-dressed.²²

Her time in Savannah was emotionally intense, and she captured a sense both of extreme highs and lows. Let me start with the highs. As elsewhere in the contested colonies, over time loyalists became increasingly concentrated into towns, regions, and migration streams as a result of British campaigning. In Savannah, this concentration acted to create tight circles of association, and often stimulated accelerated courtship and intermarriage. In a letter to her own new husband² dated 15 March 1780, Elizabeth reported "[t]hat a spirit of matrimony has got among" loyalist families, and claimed that people were "following our example in the matrimonial way."²³ Even before marriage, she described the emotional manifestations of this tightening of association and socialisation. She remembered feeling an "affection...for a short time that I can hardly define" towards a friend of her father's, whom she described as "a very handsome man for his time of life," and also remembered feeling rather overwhelmed and bashful when dining with British officers, who had been invited by her guardian because "he thought they could not show too much attention to those who had rescued us from rebel power." Johnston's

² Aged fifteen, Elizabeth was engaged to William Johnston some time in the summer of 1779, and the pair were married on 21 November

recollection of her courtship and marriage to William Johnston (the dashing 25-year-old captain of the New York Volunteers) is romanticised to a, frankly, nauseating degree.³

The lows were more frequent and more lasting. Johnston recalled how, during the French and American siege of Savannah in 1779, some 60 loyalist women and children were crowded together with her in a barn opposite the town, “all intimate friends.” As these and other refugees on Hutchinson’s island watched the Patriots attempt to storm the works at sunrise on 9 October, she remembered that “every heart in our barn was aching, every eye in tears.” The collective sense of relief when the attack failed was apparently palpable, and shortly followed by the women themselves making “war on the poultry and animals.” Besides this collective trauma, Johnston recalled innumerable personal moments of devastation and distress. She witnessed first hand the anti-British disaffection of abandoned Chesapeake loyalists, suffered a rough, tedious, and mosquito-plagued passage confined in a transport ship, discovered that her widowed sister-in-law’s vessel had been captured by a privateer, and found that her brother-in-law had been shot in the back near Augusta. But it was separation from her husband that figured most prominently as an emotional drain, and sometimes a physical pain: she described herself at various points as “very disconsolate”, “in tears”, “weighed down with grief”, “the thought of the danger he had been in overpowered my mind.” She stated that their deteriorating circumstances reaffirmed her dependence on prayer.

Her extant letters show that this was no retrospective or nostalgic device. In them, she apologised for her rapturous expressions, acknowledging them to be unfeminine and overtly passionate, and “not so becoming in my sex,” and

³ She also remembered a “very delightful” voyage to New York with Henry Clinton’s convoy after Charleston had been captured, socialising with fellow Loyalists from other parts of the colonies who also gloried in the victory.

retreated to idealised, submissive assertions: “I have no wish but to please you in everything.”²⁴ For his part, William responded with poems and assurances, finding “exquisite pleasure” in her letters and fretting when they were delayed or missing, wishing that it were more frequently possible to travel to Savannah without impropriety.²⁵ Though he continued to put his military career first, he wanted to know how she spent her time, and who among her new circle of friends was being attentive to her when she was seven months pregnant with their first child. Both were acutely conscious of gender in their interactions, and Elizabeth often dealt with this by being self-deprecating, acknowledging that her request for several Charleston purchases was something “your sex have no business with” and commenting, wryly, that “[y]ou’ll probably think it encroaching beyond the privileges of a wife.”²⁶

Elizabeth’s letters also revealed that the balance of power in their relationship was not as one-sided as it appeared superficially, something also owing to her transition from a fifteen-year-old bride to a more experienced mother. She saw it as her responsibility to monitor William’s “impatient disposition”, and kept her eyes peeled for civil opportunities that William might accept outside of the military, trying to persuade him to quit the army. On numerous occasions, Elizabeth’s more devout Protestantism found expression, as she cautioned her husband about gambling, commenting “I should hope you will not act contrary to my wishes in a matter so easily to be complied with.”²⁷ In later years her tone was more assertive, warning that “should you refuse this request I never will forgive your cruelty,” and stating that “I hope I need say no more on this subject in future.”²⁸ Increasingly frustrated at their prolonged separation, as they waited for William’s regiment to disband at the close of the war, Elizabeth signed off a letter from St. Augustine, Florida, in 1783 as “your once truly happy, tho’ now afflicted wife.”²⁹

In conclusion, Elizabeth Johnston's emotional landscape was wrought out of the profound dislocation, uncertainty, and new patterns of socialisation created by the maelstrom of the Revolutionary War. She emerged out of the conflict carrying psychological trauma that continued to influence her relationships with her partner, children, and others – without a sense of belonging, despite attempts to refashion a livelihood and hold together a family in Florida, then Scotland, then Jamaica, where she became deeply introspective. There, Elizabeth home-taught her own children, reading each morning, conducting family prayers, and instructing her girls in sewing, only consenting to their attending school after they had been in Jamaica for ten years, when she was aged 32. For his part, William agreed not to have company on Sunday, and never interfered with Elizabeth's discipline or mode of child-raising.³⁰ Only in her final destination, Nova Scotia, did she rediscover some semblance of communal identity, in what Maya Jasanoff recently described as “a congenial haven” where Elizabeth relished the company of fellow loyalists – a few of them old acquaintances, but the rest “perfect strangers.”

White women were denied a Loyalist identity based purely on political allegiance since they were denied an independent political identity. In late 1778, Elizabeth Lichtenstein was actually granted her father's Georgia lands by a Patriot Board of Commissioners, following his escape to a British man-of-war, precisely because they recognised her innocence, and she noted that “cases besides mine show that they did give the property to wives and children whose husbands and fathers had been forced away.”³¹ So white women did not, like their menfolk, end up as emigrants or fugitives because of their political loyalism. They tended to end up as fugitives and emigrants by association, through the decisions of their fathers and husbands. But where they did find common ground, and a common loyalist identity, was through their peculiar emotional trauma – in some cases traumas that were shared collectively in an

all-female environment, in others traumas that were held individually but nonetheless commonplace. This is something that Mary Beth Norton noticed in the Loyalist Commission Claims, where she found that “evidence of extreme mental stress permeates the female loyalists’ petitions and letters, while it is largely absent from the memorials of male exiles.” Though Johnston’s Revolution was luckier than many others’, she herself concluded “Like all human enjoyments, mine was not full and satisfactory.”³² Of course, Patriot women also suffered losses, disruptions, and dislocations, but they were generally less likely to be herded together in new social constellations. Plus, the embracing of “Republican Motherhood” in the fledgling United States was a forward-looking impulse that sought to link women to new ideas of citizenship through the medium of the family. In contrast, white women on the other side came to understand their identity as Loyalists by looking backwards to their sense of collective persecution. This retrospection afforded some advantages – such as Johnston’s sanitising of her associations with slavery, her passing over the more unsavoury acts committed by her family during the war, and her romanticising of the heroism and camaraderie of the loyalist sorority. Ultimately, this shared emotional trauma, buttressed by the virtues of obedience, self-sacrifice, and devotion to the family, helped to solidify the diasporic community.

¹ Elizabeth Lichtenstein Johnston, *Recollections of a Georgia loyalist*, edited by A.W. Eaton, (New York and London: M. F. Mansfield & company, 1901, reprinted Spartanburg, S.C.: Reprint Co., 1972), pp.9-10.

² *Church Times* (Halifax, Nova Scotia), 29 Sept. 1848.

³ For the classic treatment of loyalists, see Mary Beth Norton, *The British Americans: The Loyalist Exiles in England, 1774-1789* (Boston & Toronto: Little, Brown, & Co., 1972).

⁴ Frederick Wheelock Harris quoted in Charlotte I. Perkins, *The Romance of Old Annapolis Royal* (Halifax: Historical Association of Annapolis Royal, 1934), pp.92-93.

⁵ Kronstadt was the seat of the Russian Baltic fleet, and guards the approaches to St. Petersburg. Johnston records the names of her paternal grandparents as Gustavus Philip Lichtenstein (of German descent but born in England) and Beatrice Elizabeth Lloyd (English or Irish). Johnston, *Recollections*, p.37.

⁶ From various sources it is likely that Johann Lichtenstein settled in Georgia between 1755 and 1757. According to his testimony to a royal commission (see below) he went to America in 1755 while his daughter recalled that he knew John Milledge (born in 1757) from infancy.

⁷ Egmont Papers, University of Georgia Library, 14201, p.208; *Collections of the Georgia Historical Society*, 22 vols. (Savannah: Georgia Historical Society, 1840-1996), vol. 1, “A Voyage to Georgia begun in the Year 1735 by Francis Moore,” pp.90, 104, 132; Margaret Davis Cate, *Our Todays and Yesterdays: A Story of Brunswick and the Coastal Islands* (Glover Bros., Inc., Brunswick, Georgia, 1930), pp.58, 118.

⁸ Johnston, *Recollections*, p.41.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.45, 73, 76, 85. The term “servant” was commonly used in the eighteenth century to classify black slaves.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp.215, 218, 221. Lewis Johnston ultimately “disposed of your negroes” for £450 according to a letter from St. Augustine, Florida, dated 12 February 1784. Ibid., p.222.

¹¹ Letter from Elizabeth Johnston to her husband, St. Augustine, Florida, 12 February 1784, in Johnston, *Recollections*, p.222.

¹² Ibid., pp.108-109, 123.

¹³ Johnston, *Recollections*, p.85. For a wider discussion of the limited extent to which the lowcountry female population shared and expressed a common gender identity, see Betty Wood, *Gender, Race, and Rank in a Revolutionary Age: The Georgia Lowcountry, 1750-1820* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000).

¹⁴ Johnston, *Recollections*, p.50. See also her tribute to him upon his death, aged seventy-nine years. Ibid., p.127.

¹⁵ Letter from John Adams to James Sullivan, Philadelphia, 26 May 1776. *Adams Family Correspondence*, ed. L.H. Butterfield et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), vol. 1, p.401.

¹⁶ Benjamin Rush, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush: His “Travels Through Life” Together With His Commonplace Book from 1789-1813*, ed. George W. Corner (Princeton: American Philosophical Society, 1948), p.119.

¹⁷ Robert M. Calhoon, “Loyalism and Neutrality,” in *A companion to the American Revolution*, ed. Jack P. Greene & J.R. Pole (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.235.

¹⁸ Letter from Dr. Lewis Johnston to William Johnston, Savannah, 20 August 1774, in Johnston, *Recollections*, pp.27-8.

¹⁹ Leslie Hall, *Land and Allegiance in Revolutionary Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), p.30.

²⁰ Eaton, pp.45-46.

²¹ Ibid., p.48. Archibald Campbell, *Journal of an Expedition Against the Rebels of Georgia in North America under the Orders of Archibald Campbell Esquire Lieutenant Colonel of His Majestys Regiment 1778*, ed. Colin Campbell (Darien: Ashantilly Press, 1981), 22 December 1778, p.15.

²² Johnston, *Recollections*, p.49.

²³ Ibid., p.184.

²⁴ Letter from Elizabeth Johnston to William Johnston, Savannah, 10 March 1780. Ibid., pp.183, 184 (March 15).

²⁵ Letter from William Johnston to Elizabeth Johnston, St. Augustine, Florida, 27 March 1780. Ibid., p.187.

²⁶ Letter from Elizabeth Johnston to William Johnston, Savannah, 16 January 1781. Ibid., p.196.

²⁷ Ibid., 195.

²⁸ Letter from Elizabeth Johnston to William Johnston, St. Augustine, Florida, 12 February 1784. Ibid., p.223.

²⁹ Letter from Elizabeth Johnston to William Johnston, St. Augustine, Florida, 2 January 1784. Ibid., p.215.

³⁰ Ibid., pp.85-86.

³¹ Johnston, *Recollections*, p.47.

³² Ibid., p.70.